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Tyler “Psycho” Smith

October 5, 2014
Anatomy of a Murder

By Jerry Mitchell
The Clarion-Ledger

A tower officer opened the cell door to enable a gang killing inside the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility, a witness told investigators.

And after Tyler "Psycho" Smith — who has a history of assaulting fellow inmates and correctional officers — had finished choking and stomping Clifton Majors that night of Sept. 1, 2013, Smith returned to that same tower officer, celebrating his kill, a video shows.

Prosecutors didn't know the video existed until The Clarion-Ledger showed it to them. District Attorney Michael Guest said they're investigating.

Records obtained by The Clarion-Ledger raise questions about what roles, if any, prison officials played in the events leading to Majors' murder.

They fired the tower officer the next day, according to those records, but Corrections Commissioner Chris Epps denied any officer played a role in the slaying.

Records show prison officials fired the tower officer the next day, but Corrections Commissioner Chris Epps denied any officer played a role in the killing.

"The MDOC investigation did not reveal any officer opened the cell door," he said. "MDOC refers any case for prosecution where credible evidence reveals a crime has been committed."

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In 2000, Majors and his brother, Scott, got sent to prison for their involvement in an armed robbery.

While behind bars, Majors began to change his life, taking classes from the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, recalled Bill Hartman, a businessman who became an inmate and later a Baptist preacher.

While an inmate at South Mississippi Correctional Institute in Leakesville, Majors witnessed a fellow member of the Simon City Royals beat to death 50-year-old inmate Percy Barnes on Oct. 22, 2010, reportedly over a debt owed the gang.

"When he called me and told me the man had been killed," said his mother, Brenda Moreno, "he was in tears."
Gangs despise snitches, but he decided to share what he saw anyway, saying, "Somebody's got to make a stand," she said. "I begged him not to, but he did it anyway."

The investigation ended with gang member Zachary Scarborough pleading guilty to manslaughter. His was sentenced to 10 years.

To ensure Majors remained safe, he was moved to Central Mississippi Correctional Facility.

He felt safe inside the B-1 building at the Central Mississippi prison, Moreno said. "They were older men who didn't mess with the drugs and weren't gang members."

But beyond the fence, he could sense danger, inmates glaring at him, she said.

In summer 2013, he heard that he would be moved from the B-1 building to the C-1 building, she said.

He told Warden Eydie Winkel that he would be killed if they moved him, and she didn't believe him, Moreno said. "He was terrified."

Winkel, who has since retired, did not respond to a request for an interview.

According to records, Majors told prison officials he had "testified against a Simon City Royal in 2011, and now they say that they are going to kill him. He states no one knew he was here until a Simon City Royal they call Birmingham got here and told everyone who he was."

His brother, Scott, said he talked with a corrections investigator, who reassured him Majors wouldn't be moved.

But Majors was indeed moved to C-1, and when he entered, he could tell it wasn't safe and asked officers to let him return to B-1, Moreno said. They refused.
This July 31, 2013, note was put into Majors' file: "Do not move back to B-1 per Warden Winkel."

Within days, an inmate beat Majors.

Prison officials moved him to the "L" zone, where he was placed in protective custody.

■

In the months following his 2011 arrival in prison, Tyler James Smith grew increasingly violent toward inmates, often beating those much shorter than his 6-foot-2 frame.

He was just as violent with staff — biting, punching and slapping officers.

He was a known member of the Simon City Royals, and prison officials described him in documents as "actively involved in disruptive gang activity and is a confirmed leader, enforcer, disruptive core member or recruiter of a Security Threat Group (gang)."

He grew increasingly defiant, refusing to follow orders, breaking the glass in his cell door, cursing officers, spitting on them and attacking them.

On Feb. 25, 2013, he stabbed fellow inmate Johnny Thornton, who was taken to the hospital for brain surgery. It marked his fourth assault in two weeks.

Three days later, Smith tried to hang himself in front of officers, and he was sent to Central Mississippi Correctional Facility for a mental examination.

In March, he assaulted another inmate. In the months that followed, he threw urine on one officer, touched the breast of a female officer, slapped two officers, punched another officer, set a fire and assaulted an inmate.
But instead of keeping him in the most restricted part of the prison, prison officials returned him on Aug. 13, 2013, to the general population. His file contains no reason from prison officials for this move.

Scott Majors and Brenda Moreno

After being moved to the "L" zone, Majors expressed his fears, said his brother, Scott. "He told me, 'They're about to get me. You've got to get me out of here.'"

Unable to reach the warden or others who might listen, Moreno said she told her son on Sept. 1, 2013, "Just as soon as the sun rises, I'm coming down there."

That night, officers placed Smith on the cleanup crew, despite the fact his prison violence and violations took up 78 pages, including a recent attack on officers with a broom.
A recording of video monitors show many inmates already resting for the night when Smith joined two other inmates, who were sweeping and picking up trash.

At 7:38 p.m., the tower officer opened the drawer, giving Smith Latex gloves to wear. Smith explained later he wanted the gloves so he wouldn't get blood on his hands.

The main video camera in the pod would have captured all of his movements, but someone earlier had tilted the camera downward.

Smith walked toward Majors' cell and told the tower officer to open it, inmate Carlos Moore told corrections investigators.

Several minutes passed by when Moore said he and another inmate "heard what sounded like gasping."

He said he saw Smith "walking back to his cell with blood on his clothing and one shoe," and a broom handle in his hand.

At 7:54 p.m., Smith dashed up to the top tier, still holding the broom handle, the video shows.
Tyler Smith flashes signs at the tower officer while a correctional officer turns his back.

Moore said he heard Smith yelling, "I killed him."

Two minutes later, Smith returned to the tower officer, celebrating his kill and flashing what might be gang signs at the officer, the video shows.

The floor officer signaled the tower officer, presumably for medical care.

The floor officer turned his back on Smith as the inmate continued to celebrate his kill, hurling a wastebasket full of trash across the pod floor, circling the entire pod and shadowboxing the air.

On the video, the officer never arrested Smith, never stopped him, never subdued him, and never ordered him to sit down.

After 7:58 p.m., another officer finally entered the pod and handcuffed the inmate.
The officer sent Smith outside, where he chest-bumped a fellow inmate and announced, "I killed the motherf-----."

He later told authorities Majors was going to kill him so he struck first.

"My son was less than 5-foot-6, 120 pounds and a gentle spirit," Moreno said. "He didn't start anything."

His brother, Scott, said he was told Smith had been on the outs with the Royals and that carrying out this killing allowed him to pick back up his "flag" with the gang.

Majors was killed less than two months short of when Smith would have walked free from prison.

"At this point in my life, I am a danger to others," Smith told authorities. "I have done everything in my power to stay in prison, because I am aware that I will kill others. I do not want to go into society and that is the main reason I killed Inmate Majors. I have never had any prior dealings with Inmate Majors, but I am aware we are both in the same gang."

He told authorities when he came inside Majors' cell, the inmate pulled out a shank, and he bent the shank back and forth to make sure Majors could not stab him with it, cutting his hand.

But Smith, who has "666" tattooed on his face, made no mention of such self-defense in a poem he wrote after, saying he spoke to Majors the whole time he choked and punched him:

"U stupid Bitch! Now ur gonna Die!"

"I could see in his eyes the Question 'Why?'""

"U Plotted on me & tried to kill me!"

In his eyes it was fear & recognition I could see,
I asked

"Will u beg for ur life?"

I let his throat go,

"Please don't kill me Psycho, I want to go home November the 13th & I got a mom, kids & wife."

I then beat him into (un)consciousness,

When I was done the room was a mess,

Blood was everywhere & it sparked my intrest (sic)

I drank 3 mouth fulls (sic) as my reward for the kill ...

When rescue workers arrived at 8:10 p.m., they found Majors with his head against the wall and his legs hanging off the bed.

He had been severely beaten, bruised, stomped and choked, blood covering his face.

He was still breathing, and they began CPR. Ten minutes later, they pronounced him dead.

The next morning, Moreno got a telephone call from a man who identified himself as the chaplain at Central Mississippi.

That is all she can remember. She knew her son was gone.

Inside Majors' cell, corrections investigators found a shank with no blood on it and something stuffed in the door's locking system. What remains unknown is who stuffed it there.
Did Majors put it there so he could leave his cell? Did someone else put it there so Smith could get inside? Or did someone put it there afterward?

Moreno said her son talked about having trouble with the locking of his cell door.

After being indicted for Majors’ murder, Smith was moved to Rankin County Jail to await trial. He has already seriously assaulted an inmate there, records show.

After her son’s funeral, Moreno met with corrections officials, who told her they believed her son was resting when Smith attacked him.

She said Commissioner Epps told her son’s cell door wasn’t working and that’s how Smith got in to kill him.

At one point, she said Epps asked her, "What can I do for you?"

She replied, "Can you raise somebody from the dead?"

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October 5, 2014

‘Protection money’ common for inmate families

By Jerry Mitchell
The Clarion-Ledger

Families have paid thousands of dollars in "protection money" to inmates, gangs and guards to keep their loved ones from being harmed or killed behind bars.

Days before last Christmas, Janet Stewart got a telephone call, asking if she wanted to see her son alive again.

The caller wanted $400 and identified himself as an inmate at the Wilkinson County Correctional Facility — the same prison where her son was serving time.
She took the threat seriously. Gang members had already beaten her son Dec. 1.

"When somebody says he has your kid for ransom, you're going to pay," she said. "You're going to do everything you can to keep them alive."

She sent $400 to the inmate by way of Green Dot, a prepaid credit card service that inmates use.

Days later, gang members stabbed her son anyway.

Upset, she texted the inmate and asked why.

He texted her back: "Those are just growing pains."

Three days later, the family sat around a tree, minus the yuletide cheer. "My kids did without Christmas," she said.

Sabrina Clanton, whose young son was behind bars for several years, said her mother sent up to $350 a month to inmates through Green Dot cards. "It was to pay these gang members off so he could stay alive," she said.

Her family had every reason to fear.

After her son arrived at Walnut Grove Correctional Facility at age 17, gang members stabbed him 32 times, leaving him blind in one eye, she said. "I cried for a week."

Three more assaults followed, including another stabbing, this one at Wilkinson County Correctional Facility.

With each threat, Clanton felt more helpless, her family having to pay a ransom by a deadline or "he would be killed," she said. "His family and friends were all sending money."
Corrections Commissioner Chris Epps said when claims are substantiated, his department takes action and refers cases for prosecution.

Clanton said she tried to report the extortion but wasn’t able to get through to anyone. She told The Clarion-Ledger her son was going to be killed, which the newspaper reported to Epps, who moved her son to protective custody.

None of the families wanted their imprisoned relatives identified for fear of gang retaliation.

In a lawsuit filed by the ACLU and Southern Poverty Law Center against East Mississippi Corrections Facility, Matthew Naidow, a correctional officer there, acknowledged some inmates extort other inmates and their families, saying, "We’re going to kill you or stab you or beat you up or whatever if you don’t have your family send in some Green Dot money."

Brenda Moreno, whose son, Clifton Majors, was murdered behind bars last year, said she paid $200 to a correctional officer, who telephoned her and promised to keep her son safe at the State Penitentiary at Parchman.

She quit paying after learning the officer was collecting money from multiple families, she said.

Days before her son was released from prison, Diane Mathis spoke with The Clarion-Ledger.

During his time behind bars, she received repeated threats through texts or calls to her cell phone that they would harm her son in the State Penitentiary if she didn't pay them.

One text warned her if she didn't pay they would "beat the f--- out" of her son.

Over a two-year period, she was forced to pay between $2,000 and $2,500, she said.
The amount put her deep in debt, but she had no other choice, she said. "(People) say it's a con game, but what if it's not? They'll kill my son."

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The Mississippi Department of Corrections has installed 40-foot-high netting around Central Mississippi Correctional Facility at a cost of $1.3 million to stop contraband from being thrown over the fence and into the prison.
October 5, 2014

Inmates, experts: Gangs rule Mississippi’s prisons

By Jerry Mitchell
The Clarion-Ledger

Inside Mississippi’s prisons, gangs rule.

If you refuse to join, they will beat you, stab you, addict you, extort you, abuse you and-or rape you.

And there is no place to hide because corrections officials won't let you live separately from gangs — despite a state Department of Corrections policy that declares "zero tolerance" for them.

"When you walk in, you walk into bedlam," one inmate, whose name is not being used for his safety, told The Clarion-Ledger. "Gang members stab people down, and nothing happens to them."

Corrections Commissioner Chris Epps disagrees that gangs are powerful in Mississippi prisons.

In fact, his department doesn't recognize gangs, he said. "These inmates are identified as Security Threat Groups. The inmates are classified appropriately, following the national trend of correctional practitioners."

At last count, 5,520 inmates of Mississippi's 19,972-inmate prison population were classified as members of Security Threat Groups. More than half the inmates at Wilkinson County Correctional Facility belong to gangs.

"If your prison is made up by more than half gang members, the gangs are going to run the place," said George Knox, director of the Chicago area-based National Gang Crime Research Center. "You're not going to be able to use a basketball without their permission."
Joe Baumann, who has worked as a correctional officer for three decades and is a chapter president of the California Correctional Peace Officers Association, said some prisons segregate gangs "because of their sheer number and their propensity to try and take over a facility."

Utah's prisons are among them.

Epps said Mississippi has much different demographics than Utah and must use a different approach.

Some corrections experts say the best approach is to dilute the strength of gangs by dividing them.

Baumann said he believes it's best to have "all your bad apples in one barrel. You let them run one area of the facility, rather than having them run multiple areas."

Ideally, he said prisons should also isolate top gang leaders and limit their contact with other inmates, making it difficult for the leaders to run day-to-day operations.

Without that, "you have them running street gangs," he said. "You have them calling hits from prison."

Prison officials must suppress gangs, or they will rule, he said.

When gangs go unchecked, there are horrible consequences, corrections expert Lindsay Hayes said. "There are plenty of examples of that."

Inside Mississippi prisons, gangs operate much the way they do on the streets — by cell phone, communicating by calls and texts.

The Clarion-Ledger has seen texts used by inmates inside prison to set up secret conference calls with fellow gang members across the U.S.
Tangi Truelove wasn’t prepared for what she saw when she began working at East Mississippi Correctional Facility in Meridian as a crisis counselor in August 2013.

"The gangs run the prison," she said. "It's unbelievable. I've never seen anything like it."

Gangs don’t just take over correctional officers, she said, "they own them."

Issa Arnita, MTC's director of communications, noted Truelove didn't work for their company. Instead, she worked for a health care provider contracted by the prison.

Since MTC took over the prison, "we've made great improvements at this facility and the others we operate in Mississippi in security and overall operations," he told The Clarion-Ledger. "And we continue to look for ways to make it even better."

Truelove said she sometimes saw gang tattoos on officers. "I asked a couple of them, and they said, 'That's my past life.'"

Knox said gang members study correctional officers, searching for weak spots, such as gambling, money, sex, politics or racism.

"They'll spot these issues and twist them to compromise," he said. "They'll get an officer to bring in drugs or cell phones."

Gang members get friends to apply as officers, he said. "Not all gang members have a rap sheet."

As a general rule of thumb, he said, "no one is thinking a correctional officer will fall romantically."

Matthew Naidow, a correctional officer at East Mississippi Correctional Facility, testified in a lawsuit that once inmates have compromised officers, that information can be used against them.
Behind bars, inmates who don't join gangs are called "peons," and they can become victims of gangs' scams and worse.

Inmates describe how gang members with shanks provide "security" outside the showers. If peons want to shower, they must pay the gang "dues." To stay unharmed in their cell, they must pay "rent."

Often, gangs get paid by Green Dot Cards (prepaid debit cards). Other payments can include cash, canteen items, meals, property and sometimes favors, including sexual deeds and illegal acts.

Experts say gangs seek to get inmates hooked on drugs or in debt, demanding additional sums to what is borrowed.

If inmates fail to pay on time, they face the threat of being beaten or stabbed.

When the money stops flowing, gangs sometimes drive peons off their pod by beating or stabbing them, inmates say.

Truelove said she worried about her own safety and those she worked with.

"You don't know if you're going to come back out because you don't know who's dirty or who's clean," she said. "You don't make friends there."

That was in stark contrast to Bolivar County Correctional Facility, where she previously worked, she said. "(Inmates) weren't even allowed to have folders with gang symbols. It was so strict there."

At East Mississippi, she said she saw some inmates with machetes.

One day, an inmate nearly stabbed a friend of hers, a nurse, she said. "I was so shaken by it, I was done."

What upset her was that officers refused to "take that shank away from the inmate," she said. "When I asked them why, they told me, 'That
shank is probably in a different cell now.' They didn't do anything. I knew then I was not safe."

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Some question Epps’ dual roles

By Jerry Mitchell
The Clarion-Ledger

A federal judge in 2012 called the Walnut Grove Correctional Facility "a cesspool of unconstitutional and inhuman acts and conditions."

Before the next year ended, the prison scored a perfect 100 from the American Corrections Association.

"I am extremely proud to have this private facility achieve a perfect score under new management," Epps said on Nov. 22, 2013. "Achieving 100 percent in both categories of standards is very difficult. This
validates the professionalism and care that Management & Training Corp. has brought to Walnut Grove."

He remains president of the organization that awarded the 100 score, ACA.

Jody Owens, managing attorney for the Southern Poverty Law Center's Mississippi office, had praise for the work Epps did heading a task force that brought reforms state officials are hoping will save the state $266 million in prison expenses.

"It's one of Epps' more significant contributions," said Owens, who served on the task force. "It recognizes the state has been wrong in sentencing and rehabilitation."

But he questioned the perfect score given Walnut Grove and others. "It's kind of sad what Epps has done, but it just shows you the rubber-stamping process."

The violence and other problems in the prisons are "being overlooked when these grades are passed out," he said. "It makes you question the integrity of the process."

Corrections officer Berl Goff, who was brought in to help clean up the private prison, said he was stunned to learn the facility had received a 93 in 2009 from the ACA. A Justice Department probe concluded some staff had sex with minors who were inmates, brutally beat youths and turned a blind eye to inmates possessing shanks.

"Explain to me how a federal investigation from 2009 and 2010 showed it to be the most egregious prison," yet ACA, headed by Epps, gave the facility a 93, he said.

"There's no conflict of interest?" Goff asked. "C'mon."

The Clarion-Ledger asked Epps for an interview, but, in a rare response from him, he turned down that request, insisting instead the newspaper submit all questions in writing. In his written response, Epps denied conflict, saying the ACA is a peer-review procedure.
"Experts from other states conduct the audits," he said. "MDOC was already attaining 100 percent scores in years prior to me becoming ACA president in 2013."

He's right.

In May 2003, ACA gave the State Penitentiary at Parchman a perfect 100, and the state relied on that accreditation as proof conditions didn't violate the Eighth Amendment.

Before the month ended, a federal judge rejected that claim, concluding conditions inside the prison's Unit 32 were horrific and that ACA accreditation did not prove conditions were constitutional. The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals agreed.

"ACA accreditors reviewed Parchman's written policies, but not their actual practices," said Margaret Winter, associate director of the ACLU National Prison Project.

These days, Epps is riding high in the corrections world.

The same man who started in 1982 as a correctional officer at Parchman's Unit 29 to augment his pay as a Delta teacher is now president of the ACA and the Association of State Correctional Administrators — the first person to simultaneously head both. Just three years ago, he won the award as the Outstanding Corrections Commissioner in the Nation, awarded by the ASCA. He has even talked of running for political office.

"Part of my motivation for my career is to be of service to my state and my fellow man as well as my God," he said in a 2009 radio interview. "I think that the calling to elected office, for the right purposes, is one of the highest callings a person can have."

Former Gov. Ronnie Musgrove said Mississippi is fortunate to have someone who understands the system of corrections like Epps does. "Fourteen years ago when I appointed Chris to be the head of the
Department of Corrections, we had no doubt he would make a great commissioner. Time has proven all of us to be correct."

André de Gruy, director of the Capital Defense Counsel in Jackson, praised Epps after serving with him this year on the task force aimed at reducing the prison population. The newly enacted law gives judges more flexibility to impose alternative sentences, including ordering treatment for drug users. More than three-fourths of prisoners are addicted.

But Epps faces challenges in the year to come.

He has had to repeatedly return to lawmakers for millions more to cover budget deficits because of increasing numbers of inmates. But with that population falling from 22,008 in January to 19,972 last month, lawmakers may be less inclined to cover any budget deficit.

House Corrections Committee Chairman Tommy Taylor has experience in corrections. For more than a decade, he worked as the warden of the Bolivar County Regional Correctional Facility.

Asked what he thought about Epps' service heading the agency, he replied that he believes the Department of Corrections "has the capability of being the number one correctional agency in the state. You have some very dedicated employees there."

Regardless of whether something goes right or wrong, he said, "it all falls back on the leader of the organization."

And lately, there's been more wrong than right.

On April 4, 2013, court monitors at Walnut Grove prison reported that "assaults involving weapons continue to occur at alarming levels" and that assaults needed to be reduced by at least half to constitute "reasonably safe living conditions."

On Nov. 4, 2013 — weeks before Walnut Grove scored 100 — monitors found the prison was in partial compliance with both the "reasonably
safe living conditions" and "sufficient numbers of adequately trained staff."

Forty days after Epps gushed over the perfect score, three pods at Walnut Grove exploded with violence on New Year's Eve, and at least 16 inmates were treated at the hospital for injuries.

On Aug. 6, attorneys from the Southern Poverty Law Center and ACLU representing inmates at the prison told a federal court that changes are needed now to prevent the "ongoing, substantial risk of serious injury — including death — from the extraordinarily dangerous conditions at Walnut Grove."

In documents, they described "a major escalation in inmate-on-inmate violence over the past several months at the Walnut Grove Youth Correctional Facility, and in the last seven months alone there have been two riots during which the Mississippi Department of Corrections lost control of the facility and 25 inmates were seriously wounded."

Celeste McDonald, vice president for MTC's corporate communications, disagreed with the attorneys' assessment. She said the staff responded immediately to the New Year's Eve violence and that the incident was under control in an hour.

"In July, an incident occurred in one of the housing units where nine offenders were injured, taken to the hospital and released," she said. "No inmates in either incident were seriously wounded. Since (the) July 10 incident, there has only been one offender on offender assault at the Walnut Grove facility."

Court monitors said despite injuries to 16 inmates that included "wounds, lacerations and fractures," MTC recorded the New Year's Eve riot as "a single fight/assault. Even with that exception, the rate (of violence) has increased since June 2013."

As a result of the riot, seven officers were either fired or resigned. The reasons, according to monitors: "Passing contraband to inmates, refusing a vehicle search, failure to report known violations, fraternization (with inmates) and drug possession."
And on Sept. 25, the ACLU and Southern Poverty Law Center filed a federal lawsuit against East Mississippi Correctional Facility, charging that conditions at the private prison, where 70 percent of the inmates are mentally ill, are "barbaric."

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Mississippi prisons: Guards, low pay and corruption

By Jerry Mitchell
The Clarion-Ledger

Starting pay if you're a corrections officer in Mississippi more than qualifies your family of three for food stamps.

You won't get paid overtime.

And any day could be your last.

"It's extremely stressful," said Janna Bridges, who worked as a corrections officer for eight years at the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility. "Things can be going great for hours. Then they go haywire."
Haywire can include an inmate looking to hurt you, she recalled of one near miss she faced. "I just knew the end was near."

Fellow inmates talked the inmate out of attacking her, she said.

These days, the starting salary for a state correctional officer is $22,006 a year.

Bridges recalled an inmate coming up to her and suggesting, "We can improve your salary a whole lot if you will make a few trips into Jackson for me."

She refused but saw some officers succumb to temptation, she said. "You can see corruption. It's everywhere."

Inmates pop pills and smoke marijuana, meth, crack and spice, she said. "I don't know of any drug that didn't make the door and come on in. It was a free-flowing retail store out there."

Inmates even gave one officer the nickname "Mr. Cocaine," she said.

She knew about sex between officers and inmates, knew about officers making thousands from contraband they brought in, she said. "You know so much, but you can't report it."

If you did, drugs or something else might be planted inside your car, she said. "You can't talk about a lot of stuff."

A former prison gang leader, who asked that his name not be used for fear of reprisals, told The Clarion-Ledger that many officers found it difficult to resist the offer of easy money.

He said he would approach a new officer with this offer: "How'd you like to make a $1,000?"

He explained that with that much worth of tobacco, the gang could clear $10,000.
Bill Hartman of Brandon, a businessman who spent time in prison for embezzling before getting involved in Christian ministry, said he saw an officer pull out roll after roll of tobacco she had stuffed under her shirt.

"There must have been 20 pounds," he said. "Money talks, and the staff are ridiculously poor."

Cellphones are especially lucrative, correctional officers and inmates say. In Mississippi, a flip phone runs $500, a touchscreen phone $800 and a charger $250.

With the help of a trusty, one officer ran a scam in which she would get inmates' families to pay her on a Green Dot Card (a prepaid debit card) in exchange for letting those families speak to inmates on her cellphone, Bridges said.

Corrections Commissioner Chris Epps said he believes it's character that determines whether officers are susceptible to bribes.

But he acknowledged "a pay increase would certainly benefit staff and would help MDOC attract a wider pool of prospective correctional officers."

One challenge he cited is that 66 percent of officers are females, supervising a 92 percent male population in the state's three prisons. Those female officers are unable to conduct strip searches of the male inmates, he said.

Mississippi's numbers exceed Louisiana, which has 42 percent female officers; Tennessee, 36; Arkansas, 33; and Alabama, 14, he said.

Contraband entering these facilities is a concern, he told The Clarion-Ledger. "Specifically, cellphones getting into the prisons is an enormous concern."

Since 2010, the department has referred 63 cases for prosecution involving correctional officers smuggling in contraband.
Those aspiring to be officers in Mississippi must take three weeks of training, followed by a week of on-the-job training.

In Michigan, training takes 16 weeks — and that's after a college education, a certificate in corrections, a lengthy civil service exam and application to be considered for the job.

In Mississippi, all that's required is a high school diploma or GED.

It’s far from an ideal situation, Matthew Naidow, a correctional officer at the East Mississippi Correctional Facility, said in testimony as part of a lawsuit brought by the ACLU and Southern Poverty Law Center against the facility.

"When you're a kid basically who's fresh out of high school and had a couple of jobs in your life like McDonald’s and Wal-Mart, and you come to work at a prison, you've got a tough road to haul," he said.

Turnover, too, is high in Mississippi, he said.

In fact, he knew of a number of officers fired for some "impropriety" by Florida-based GEO Group, a private company that ran East Mississippi Corrections Facility.

After the Utah-based MTC took over the prison in 2012, he said some officers were rehired.

He described East Mississippi as short-staffed, a problem made worse by some officers calling in sick or failing to show up for work.

As a result, some security checks go undone, documents show. Many officers do double shifts, but none working for state prisons gets overtime — only comp time.

In 2013, The Clarion-Ledger reported that officers had been forced to work more than 135,000 hours of overtime in exchange for shaky promises of future time off.
But corrections officials have insisted their policy is legal and point to November's dismissal of a class-action lawsuit.

Bridges did the job because of the rewards beyond money, she said. "I've always been on the side of the underdog."

She would help inmates with their medical and mental health issues. "Nobody was going to take care of them."

Although officers were discouraged from carrying on conversations with inmates, she listened to them anyway.

"Some of these people never had a chance," she said. "They were just born and set free to run loose."

She got so disgusted with the corruption, she considered quitting, but she wound up coming back because "I couldn't wait to see what happened tomorrow." She retired last year because of health problems.

Naidow acknowledged corruption took place at East Mississippi Correctional Facility.

"And the favors would include allowing inmates who are locked down in one area to go to another area in order to injure another prisoner, isn't that correct?" asked ACLU lawyer Margaret Winter.

"It could be," he replied.

"Or in order to extort another prisoner; isn't that correct?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied.

"And isn't it a fact that some staff take bribes from prisoners or, put another way, extort prisoners for money in order to see to it that a prisoner does not get a rules violation conviction?" she asked.

He responded that some have complained to him that officers have extorted money out of them to erase rules violation charges. "Inmates have told me that many times," he said.
"Did you rule out that that could have happened?" Winter asked.

"No, I've never ruled it out. I don't rule out anything," he said. "I believe anything is possible with inmates and staff."

Contact Jerry Mitchell at jmitchell@jackson.gannett.com or (601) 961-7064. Follow @jmitchellnews on Twitter.

Contraband In Mississippi Prison:

• 3 cigarettes: $25

• 2 marijuana "regs" joints: $25 (regular)

• 1 marijuana "hydro" joint: $25 (hydroponic)

• Small amount of spice: $25

• 2 Lortabs: $25

• Flip cellphone: $500

• Touchscreen cellphone: $800

• Charger: $250

• 15-gram pack of marijuana: $1,000

Sources: Inmates and correctional officers

People who make more than a Mississippi correctional officer:

• Car cleaners: $22,620

• Bellhops: $23,090

• Restaurant cooks: $23,300
• Personal care workers: $23,420
• Stock clerks: $24,440
• Janitors: $24,850
• Food processing workers: $24,880
• Meat packers: $24,930
• Roofers: $25,030
• Telemarketer: $25,570
• Gaming change cashiers: $25,740
• Crossing guards: $26,160

Source: myplan.com
A gang fight in April 2013 left one inmate dead at Wilkinson County Correctional Facility, then run by Corrections Corporation of America.

October 12, 2014

By Jerry Mitchell
The Clarion-Ledger

The Wilkinson County Correctional Facility has been more violent than any state prison in Mississippi — and twice as deadly as the streets of Detroit.

Over the past two years, the prison has been averaging a killing each year. If Wilkinson were a city of 100,000, it would average more than 111 slayings a year. In the most recent figures available, Detroit had 54.6 killings per 100,000.
Some inmates call this place "The Killing Field," and on May 25, the institution lived up to its name when Kendrick Walker was stabbed to death 81 times.

"We're living in a Martin Scorsese movie," one inmate told The Clarion-Ledger. "We're supposed to be on lockdown, and there are guys walking around with Samurai swords — 3- or 4-foot long swords."

![A sword made from inside Wilkinson County Correctional Center is compared in size to a spoon in this cellphone photo taken by an inmate.](image)

The Clarion-Ledger could hear banging inside the prison that sounded like a busy construction site — a sound that continued for some time.

Inmates told the newspaper the sound was metal striking metal as gang members made weapons.
Photographs taken by inmates on cellphones inside the prison show entire walls ripped out to remove reinforcing steel, which inmates say was used to form such weapons.

![Part of a wall missing inside Wilkinson County Correctional Facility from where inmates have pulled rebar out to make weapons.](image)

After viewing the pictures, former Corrections Commissioner Robert L. Johnson shook his head at what he saw.

"This is incompetency at its worst," said Johnson, who opposed private prisons as commissioner. "Honestly, I think it is symptomatic of the profit motive that drives a lot of the corrections industry instead of concern for public safety."

CCA, which formerly managed the prison, has annual revenues surpassing $1.7 billion, and a CEO pulling down more than $3.2 million in salary and benefits. MTC, which began managing the prison in summer 2013, earns annual revenues exceeding $525 million.
Issa Arnita, MTC's director of communications, said significant improvements have been made since the company took over.

"Our priority in corrections is the safety and security of our staff, offenders and the community," he said. "MTC is not driven by profit, but rather by our mission to help improve the lives of those we serve."

In 1998, community leaders opened this low- to medium-security prison in hopes of providing jobs to the small town of Woodville and the surrounding area.

But when the State Penitentiary at Parchman shut down its notorious Unit 32 in 2010 because of gang killings, violence and horrible conditions, corrections officials sent many of those inmates to Wilkinson, which became a maximum-security institution.

With the increase of gang members and leaders came an increase in violence, prompting some inmates to refer to Wilkinson as "the new Unit 32."

Between 2011 and 2013, when Corrections Corporation of America ran the prison, monthly incident reports show Wilkinson was more violent than any state prison.

At Parchman, an inmate stands a one in nearly 16 chance of being assaulted. At Wilkinson, that number is one in seven.

On April 19, 2013, members of the Gangster Disciples and Vice Lords had a confrontation in Wilkinson, and officials put the prison in lockdown. The next day, after being warned the gangs would fight again, officials kept inmates locked down in some pods and released others, records show. Freed from their cells, members of the Vice Lords swarmed other inmates, including Demond Flowers, stabbing him in the heart.

The Flowers' family settled its lawsuit against CCA for an undisclosed amount.
In the face of burgeoning problems, Corrections Commissioner Chris Epps awarded management of Wilkinson in July 2013 to MTC.

"The Mississippi Department of Corrections is looking forward to a great partnership with MTC," Epps said. "There is a need for different types of prisons, including state and regional as well as private facilities in Mississippi. MTC will be held to the same high standards as set by MDOC, and I feel extremely confident that MTC will do a great job."

Despite the change in management, the violence continued.

Last May, 33-year-old Kendrick Walker, nicknamed "Mud Cat," was just a year from being released from prison for a 10-year sentence for drug possession and possession of a firearm. According to an investigative report, animosity existed between other inmates in Wilkinson's F pod and Walker, who was affiliated with the Bloods gang.

He would get correctional officers to give him an extra food tray, leaving one inmate temporarily without, the report says. As a result of the food shortage, members of the Gangster Disciples, along with allies from the Simon City Royals, decided to attack Walker, the report says.

The Clarion-Ledger has obtained a copy of the video showing what happened.

At 12:20 p.m., Walker was sitting at a table while inmates hovered on the periphery. One inmate, identified as Kerwin "Schoolboy" Franklin, broke off a broom handle and used it to stab Walker in the back as he and other inmates attacked Walker.

When a fellow Blood gang member, Adrian Williams, came to Walker's aid, he was attacked. After he was stabbed down, gang members turned their attention to Walker, who climbed to the top of the showers.

Jumping from there to the top tier, he ran and locked himself in an unoccupied cell at about 12:22 p.m.

A standoff began. Gang members could do nothing because the cell door was locked. They were on one side, and Walker was on the other.
At 12:24 p.m., inmate Mike Powell walked over to the tower and appeared to communicate with an officer.

Three minutes later, inmates took Walker’s jean jacket and set it on fire.

Another group of inmates rendered aid to Williams and apparently tried to get officers to open the door so they could get him help. The door remained closed.

At 12:30 p.m., Powell sat on a table in front of the tower officer. A minute later, after checking on Williams, he banged on the tower window, pointing to the cell where Walker had locked himself inside.

Powell walked over to the top of the shower and used the wall to sharpen his homemade knife. He then shook hands with an inmate aiding Williams.

At 12:32 p.m., Powell sat down again at the table, this time facing the tower. After a few moments, he pointed inside the tower, appearing to signal an officer inside.

He got off the table, walked to the tower and pointed at the cell where Walker was. Then he pointed at the injured Williams on the floor. The conversation between him and the officer lasted for 17 seconds.

He then walked to the corner of the pod, where he spoke with another inmate.

After walking slowly toward the stairs, he began to run toward the cell, where Walker had locked himself inside.

Inmates told investigators they heard the metallic buzz of the tower officer unlocking the cell door.

When Walker tried to charge out, Powell and other inmates swarmed and stabbed him. When Walker went over the stair rail, Powell went with him.
Walker ran to the nearby shower, where Powell and other inmates stabbed him, beat him, kicked him and smashed him with a microwave.

Walker crumpled in a heap underneath the stairs, and his attackers walked away, seemingly satisfied.

But when Powell saw the inmate still moving, he went over and stomped Walker.

The deed done, another inmate came over and urinated on him.

It would take another 11 minutes before Maj. Gabriel Walker, chief of security, entered the pod at 12:47 p.m. with the response team commander.

By that time, inmates had already cleaned up much of the crime scene, disposing of bloody clothes, towels and knives used in the fight, the video showed.

The major ordered inmates back to their cells, but Powell ignored the order and continued to shower off the blood.

He wound up throwing away his bloody clothes, talked to another inmate and received a fresh set of clothes and exited the zone "unescorted and unrestrained," the report says.

Powell went into the dead inmate's cell and took his mattress back to his cell, he told investigators.

The major tried to handcuff Powell from behind — only to have Powell jerk his hand away, the report says. The major finally handcuffed the inmate in front, but never searched him.

After the major left, inmates came back out of their cells and continued to clean up blood from the crime scene.

Officers finally removed the body of Kendrick Walker at 1:28 p.m. — 41 minutes after they first entered.
The major, who was read his Miranda rights, told investigators that when he checked on Kendrick Walker he had no pulse and didn't appear to be breathing. He said he is not medically trained, but "Inmate Walker appeared to be deceased when he first arrived," the report says.

The video showed the major spending five seconds with Kendrick Walker before walking away. No attempt at medical assistance ever took place.

"Investigators questioned Major Walker regarding the amount of time it took to remove Inmate Walker from the pod," the report says. "He advised it took long because he was called to the B Pod because ... he thought another riot was about to ensue."

The major deemed it a crime scene, the report says. "He stated he is not sure of the protocol for responding to a homicide, but he stated he believed he was not supposed to move the body."

Corrections policy calls for officers to respond to emergencies in four minutes. They responded 27 minutes after the fight began.

One inmate identified the tower officer who opened the locked cell door, telling investigators she "works with the Gangsters."

After being read her Miranda rights, she denied popping the lock, but she admitted an inmate had paid her $1,200 to smuggle him tobacco, rolling papers and cigars. She was fired but never prosecuted.

When investigators later tried to have her take a lie detector test, they discovered she was pregnant and never questioned her.

When investigators tried to give a lie detector test to another tower officer, the polygraph examiner deemed her "psychologically unfit."

A third tower officer told investigators that inmates had used a rope and bed sheet to open the cell door — something no inmate mentioned. She was fired for employee misconduct and aiding in bringing in contraband.
In the end, none of the tower officers was given a lie detector test, and investigators concluded allegations of a tower officer popping the lock "cannot be sustained."

The time of death listed on the report? 12:20 p.m., which is when the attack of Kendrick Walker actually began.

In February, a grand jury is expected to consider murder charges against Powell and four other inmates.

Mississippi corrections officials told The Clarion-Ledger that no officer has ever been prosecuted for opening a door that enabled attacks or killings of inmates.

Asked why not, Epps replied his department "refers any case for prosecution where the credible evidence reveals a crime has been committed."

Matt Steffey, professor at Mississippi College School of Law, said if law enforcement or even the Justice Department discovers a potential conflict, they bring in an outside agency to investigate.

In this case, he said, the Department of Corrections "has such a significant conflict of interest an outside or independent investigation is necessary."

Sentencing to prison, former Corrections Commissioner Johnson said, "shouldn't be a death sentence because of dangerous conditions within the walls of our prison."

Arnita said MTC has "consistently addressed the number of assaults by investigating each and taking corrective action. We've also introduced new programming and recreational activities, which historically reduce offender-on-offender assaults and other incidence of violence."

Inside Wilkinson, gang membership makes up 86 percent of the prison population.
Since MTC took over management of Wilkinson, "we've hired a security threat group lieutenant to gather intelligence and manage these offenders," Arnita said. "This lieutenant, along with other resources, has made good progress in strategically placing inmates in housing arrangements that reduce risk of violence."

While housing gang members "comes with serious challenges," he said, "MTC has made great strides in making this facility safe, secure and more conducive to programming that can help many offenders make a successful transition back to society."

Jackson lawyer Chuck Mullins, who represented the Flowers' family in their lawsuit, said gangs are running Wilkinson and other prisons, and Mississippi corrections officials "have pretty much said they can't do anything about it. They've given up."

Epps disagreed that gangs are powerful in Mississippi prisons, saying in an emailed response to questions that his department "doesn't recognize 'gangs.' These inmates are identified as Security Threat Groups. The inmates are classified appropriately, following the national trend of correctional practitioners."

Under contract, Wilkinson prison officials must make every effort to hire locally first.

The number of people to pick from in Woodville is 1,026.

"Where are you going to find local qualified people?" Mullins asked.

One day, he said, "they're working as a checkout clerk, the next, they're looking over gangs."

—30—
Tyler Smith in prison. What he looked like when he first arrived.

October 20, 2014

Prison is 'college of criminality'

By Emily Le Coz and Jerry Mitchell
The Clarion-Ledger

One in four white males born in Mississippi will go to college. One in three of their black male counterparts will go, instead, to prison.

Both will get an education.

For $18,385 a year — which includes tuition, fees, books, room and board — time at the University of Southern Mississippi will teach a student how to function as an adult in a society that values critical thinking.
Students will network with accomplished professors and like-minded peers. They'll have internships and job prospects. If they graduate, they can expect to earn an average salary of $55,000.

For about the same price as one year at USM — $18,765 — time at the Mississippi State Penitentiary will teach inmates how to function in a lawless society that values power through violence.

Inmates will network with accomplished felons and gang members who can wield more authority than the correctional officers placed there to protect them. They'll have a diminished sense of self-worth and harbor resentment toward the criminal justice system.

If they're released, these inmates face limited job prospects and a one-in-three chance of returning to prison within three years.

A 13-month investigation by The Clarion-Ledger found a Mississippi correctional system where gangs rule and where corruption festers.

"It's basically a college of criminality," an inmate at the privately run Wilkinson County Correctional Facility told The Clarion-Ledger.

A decade-long study of 35,000 juveniles examined those who committed similar offenses. Some did time. Some didn’t.

Rather than deterring crime, incarceration made them far more likely to return, the study by Anna Aizer of Brown University and Joseph Doyle Jr. of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology concluded.

Overall, young offenders were two-thirds more likely to be incarcerated again by the age of 25 than those who never did time, according to the study.

In fact, these youth were more likely to commit "homicide, violent crime, property crime and drug crimes" than those who never went behind bars, the study found.
U.S. District Judge Keith Starrett, who served as a circuit judge for a dozen years, said many of those who went off to prison often returned to stand in front of him again. "They learn to be better criminals in prison," he said.

Michael Whelan, who served as a psychologist for Parchman from 1982 through 1993, said prison is "a breeding ground for gang activity and the teaching of criminal thoughts and sophistication. They teach each other the tools of the trade."

In some cases, those emerging are determined not to return, he said. "They've learned their lesson."

But, he said, there is no question about this: Hard time changes them all.

"Prison is a brutal place, and it hardens people," he said. "It hardened me, and I got to go home at night and be with my family."

Tyler James Smith looked baby-faced when he arrived at age 17 at the Walnut Grove Correctional Facility in 2010.

He had been convicted of a nonviolent offense, grand larceny, and had two years to serve.

Shortly after arriving, he was cited for failing to tuck his shirt in his pants, and he complained to correctional officers about an inmate who was masturbating.

In the months that followed, it was Smith who was repeatedly written up for masturbating, and he regularly began to hit, curse at, spit on and throw substances on officers.

He also began to beat up inmates, many of them smaller than his 6-foot-2 frame. He joined the Simon City Royals gang and soon had 78 pages of violations and tattoos covering his face, including the number 666.

On Sept. 1, 2013 — less than two months before he would have walked free from prison — he carried out, by his own admission, the gang’s
killing by beating and stomping to death 5-foot-6 Clifton Majors, who had cooperated with authorities investigating another gang killing.

"I have done everything in my power to stay in prison, because I am aware that I will kill others," Smith told authorities. "I do not want to go into society, and that is the main reason I killed Inmate Majors."

Reilly Morse, president and CEO of the Mississippi Center for Justice, said in his nonprofit's work with the state's at-risk youth, they have found that locking up youth for minor offenses turns them into "offenders in training."

The U.S. puts juveniles behind bars at a rate five times higher than the next highest nation.

Rather than dealing with troubled youth, school officials sometimes "throw their hands up and make it criminal," Morse said. "There are ways to solve these problems."

If offenders aren't addicted to drugs before they arrive, they often will be before they leave.

"Some of the funding of gangs on the streets comes from the sale of narcotics in prison," a Wilkinson County Correctional Facility inmate told The Clarion-Ledger. "Every one here is a possible customer."

More than three-fourths of those behind bars in Mississippi are addicted to drugs or alcohol or both.

Jadareous Davis, 18, who has grown up in the Delta town of Drew, said those he's seen emerge from prison are a shell of what they were before.

"They don't trust a lot of people," he said. "They feel like somebody is out to get them."

Many struggle to get jobs because of prison records.

Starrett said one of the biggest problems is the mindset of society toward those leaving prison.
"People think once inmates have committed a crime, they don't deserve anything," he said. "But if we don't do something, we'll merely reincarcerate them and have another victim."

—30—
Former Mississippi Corrections Commissioner Chris Epps, left, lets attorney John Colette, right, field questions outside the federal
courthouse in Jackson on Thursday, Nov. 6, 2014. Epps pleaded not guilty to 29 counts, including bribery and money laundering.

November 6, 2014

Epps: ‘I’m shocked by this’

By Geoff Pender and Jimmie Gates
The Clarion-Ledger

Prosecutors say Mississippi’s longtime prisons chief was living high, buying beachfront condos and fancy cars, raking in so much in bribes he had to launder the money.

Epps, usually gregarious, was uncharacteristically quiet as he entered and left federal court in Jackson on Thursday. He and his alleged co-conspirator, Rankin County school board president and former judge and legislator Cecil McCrory, each pleaded not guilty to a string of charges from a 49-count indictment. They were each released on $25,000 bond.

Trial is set for Jan. 5 before U.S. District Judge Henry T. Wingate. Sources close to the investigation say Thursday's indictment, which had been sealed since August, is likely a first step in a case that could grow much wider.

"I'm shocked by this," said Epps, dressed in a dark suit and sporting a gold Rolex watch, as he waited in the courtroom. Neither he, nor McCrory nor their attorneys would otherwise comment on what acting U.S. Attorney Harold Brittain called "systemic and pervasive corruption in our state government."

Epps, who resigned his $132,700 a year government job on Wednesday, is accused of taking more than $1 million in bribes and kickbacks over the last eight years in exchange for hundreds of millions of dollars in prison contracts. McCrory, who owned companies doing business with MDOC, is accused of bribing Epps and raking in cash from sweetheart contracts and consulting fees.
Authorities say Epps and McCrory hatched their conspiracy in 2007. Epps signed a no-bid MDOC contract for McCrory's company, G.T. Enterprises, to provide commissary services at state and private prisons.

Epps allegedly shook down McCrory for cash payments of $3,000 to $4,000 each about 15 times in exchange for the contract.

In 2008, McCrory sold his commissary company at a big profit, and Epps approved reassignment of the no-bid contract to the new company. Shortly after, authorities say, Epps had McCrory pay off his home mortgage with three $100,000 cashier's checks and a $50,000 check all spaced months apart.

Epps awarded more MDOC contracts to companies owned by McCrory or that had paid McCrory. Prosecutors say that after McCrory paid off Epps' home, Epps told McCrory he could get anything he wanted from MDOC.

Epps also had McCrory pay on his mortgage on a Coast beachfront condo, help him when he upgraded to a better condo, and deposit money into investment accounts Epps created. In one case, a payment of $40,000 to an Epps investment account was labeled as a consignment sale of farm equipment.

Prosecutors say that when McCrory paid him in cash, Epps would keep the bribes in a safe at his home, then make deposits of less than $10,000 to avoid scrutiny larger amounts of cash would garner. On a single day in July 2009, prosecutors say, Epps drove all over town making four $9,000 deposits at different banks.

Authorities say Epps in one instance persuaded a management and training company to hire McCrory as a consultant and even negotiated the consulting fee. Prosecutors say Epps told McCrory, "I got us $12,000 a month," which they divided evenly after subtracting the taxes McCrory would have to pay.

MDOC spends hundreds of millions of tax dollars a year in contracts, including more than $371 million for fiscal 2014.
The investigation into Epps and McCrory has been ongoing for years and included local, state and numerous federal agencies, including the FBI, IRS and U.S. Postal Service.

Leake County Sheriff Greg Waggoner said he took an initial complaint to the FBI in 2010 and off-and-on provided information. He wouldn't elaborate on the complaint.

State Auditor Stacey Pickering said his office received a complaint and started investigating in 2011.

At a press conference outside the federal courthouse Thursday, Brittain was flanked by others from the U.S. Attorney's Office, FBI, IRS and other federal agents and Pickering. They praised the investigation as a paradigm of cooperation between local, state and federal officials, but provided few details beyond what was released in the indictment and declined to answer questions.

"Our tolerance for public corruption is zero," Brittain said.

FBI Special Agent in Charge Donald Alway said the case was tough to investigate because such conspiracies often spin on "whispered conversations, sealed with a handshake deals."

Pickering said the case is "a black eye for our state."

Pickering was asked about the potential for Epps, a 32-year employee of MDOC with 12 years as commissioner, to continue to receive state retirement pay if convicted.

Pickering said he plans to push the Legislature in January for a change in state law to prohibit convicts from receiving state retirement. Pickering has in recent years pushed for tougher laws on public corruption, with only modest success. In 2013 lawmakers passed a measure he pushed that would prohibit state and local governments from hiring people convicted of stealing public money.
Knox Graham, spokesman for Gov. Phil Bryant, said the governor had no knowledge of the investigation or allegations about Epps when he reappointed him in 2012.

"If the governor had any credible evidence of any wrongdoing, he would most definitely not have reappointed him," Graham said. "We only learned of (the investigation) within the last few days."

Bryant has directed interim MDOC Commissioner Richard McCarty, who had been deputy commissioner, to review all of the agency's contracts. Graham said contracts with companies mentioned in Thursday's indictment will go out for bid.

Graham said Bryant is donating a $1,000 campaign contribution he received from McCrory to the Salvation Army.
—30—
Former Mississippi Corrections Commissioner Chris Epps, center, leaves at the U.S. Courthouse in Jackson on Thursday with his attorney, John
Colette, following Epps arraignment on multiple charges, including bribery, money laundering and wire fraud.

November 14, 2014

Chris Epps gets Mercedes day after corruption charges

By Kate Royals
The Clarion-Ledger

After the federal government moved to seize two Mercedes-Benz vehicles owned by former corrections commissioner Chris Epps, Epps walked out of a dealership on Friday with a third.

Epps and his wife visited the Jackson dealership to get a car for Catherlean Epps to drive to work the day after pleading not guilty to corruption charges in federal court, said Epps' attorney.

"Mr. and Mrs. Epps have obtained another vehicle so that Mrs. Epps could go to work every day. I don't know what make or model or year nor do I know whether the vehicle was leased or purchased," Epps' attorney John Colette said. "I'm assuming it was leased, but again, I just don't have any particulars."

Managers at the Mercedes-Benz dealership declined to comment when reached Thursday.

Federal authorities have already moved to seize two Mercedes, along with a $360,000 house and beachfront condo, that Epps owned, saying he got the assets through more than $1 million in bribes he received during his time with the Mississippi Department of Corrections.

His assets included a 2007 Mercedes-Benz S65 V12 AMG, a 2010 Mercedes-Benz S550, a $360,000 residence in Flowood's gated Lineage Lake subdivision, a $250,000 luxury beachfront condo in Pass Christian and nearly $1 million in two investment accounts.
Epps and Brandon businessman Cecil McCrory were arraigned Nov. 6 on corruption charges in connection with an alleged decade-long kickback scheme.

Both McCrory and Epps, who sported a gold Rolex watch in the courtroom, pleaded not guilty and were each released on a $25,000 bond.

Epps is accused of taking more than $1 million in bribes and kickbacks over the last eight years in exchange for nearly a billion dollars worth of prison contracts awarded to companies McCrory either owned or was linked to. McCrory is accused of bribing Epps and raking in cash from sweetheart contracts and consulting fees.

—30—
Tyler James Smith is escorted into Judge John Emfinger's Rankin County Circuit courtroom Monday to plead guilty to first-degree murder in the gang slaying of Clifton Majors inside the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility. Smith was sentenced to life in prison.

November 24, 2014

Inmate's killer: Officer opened victim's cell door

By Jerry Mitchell
The Clarion-Ledger

Inmate Tyler Smith has told the FBI a tower officer opened the locked prison cell door that enabled him to carry out the 2013 gang killing of Clifton Majors.

Agents interviewed the 21-year-old Smith, known by the nickname "Psycho," after he pleaded guilty Oct. 27 to the 2013 murder of Majors inside Central Mississippi Correctional Facility.
The FBI interview came after The Clarion-Ledger's detailed investigations into the killings of Majors and other inmates, revealing allegations that officers may have played roles.

Records show prison officials fired the tower officer the next day, but then-Corrections Commissioner Chris Epps denied any officer played a role in the killing, saying the lock to Majors' cell door had been "jammed."

But Smith told agents the tower officer electronically unlocked the cell door.

Another inmate, Carlos Moore, had told corrections investigators in the initial probe that he saw Smith wave to the tower officer, who opened the locked cell door, enabling the 6-foot-2 Smith to choke and stomp the 5-foot-6 Majors to death in his cell.

A video obtained by The Clarion-Ledger shows Smith getting a pair of latex gloves from the tower officer. Smith told authorities he wanted the gloves so he wouldn't get blood on his hands.

After the killing, Smith returned to the tower officer, celebrating.

He told the FBI the tower officer initially didn't want to help, but was convinced by the floor officer.

After the killing, the floor officer never arrested or subdued Smith or even asked him to sit down, the video shows. In fact, the officer turned his back on Smith.

The Clarion-Ledger investigation into Mississippi's prisons that began in September 2013 found a correctional system where gangs rule, corruption festers and prison serves as a "college of criminality." Its findings were chronicled last month in a month-long series, "Hard Look at Hard Times."

Prior to publication, Epps disputed the newspaper's findings and denied that gangs were powerful inside Mississippi prisons.
Asked if he thought low pay made correctional officers more susceptible to bribes, he replied, "I believe it’s the character of the individual that makes a person susceptible to many things."

Asked how pervasive corruption was, he didn't give an answer.

On Nov. 5, he resigned as Corrections Commissioner, and a day later, he pleaded not guilty to charges he took more than $700,000 in bribes that included a beachfront condo.

The Simon City Royals wanted to kill Majors because he had cooperated with authorities investigating the gang's 2010 killing of 50-year-old inmate Percy Barnes inside South Mississippi Correctional Institution.

Smith told agents he had no beef with Majors and that the two had smoked marijuana together. Both belonged to the Royals.

Smith told the FBI they discussed the gang's "Kill on Sight" order against Majors and that the gang had a "Kill on Sight" order on him, too.

Smith quoted Majors as saying if the Royals wanted him to kill Smith, that he would feel obligated to do it.

Smith told the FBI that Majors was stupid for saying that and that he felt he had to kill Majors, even though he was several weeks away from walking free from prison.

In fact, his family had reportedly gotten him a car in anticipation of his release.

Despite his repeated violence against staff members and inmates, correctional officers put Smith on the cleanup crew the night of Sept. 1, 2013.

Smith told the FBI that he entered Majors' cell after the officer opened the locked door.
He said Majors grabbed a small homemade knife to protect himself and that he grabbed the knife away, cutting himself.

Smith then choked Majors, saying when he let his throat go, Majors said, "Please don't kill me, Psycho, I want to go home November the 13th, and I got a mom, kids and wife."

Smith beat and stomped Majors until he was unconscious. "Blood was everywhere," Smith wrote in a document obtained by The Clarion-Ledger.

Majors' brother, Scott, who was also in the Royals, said Smith was on the outs with the Royals. He knew of no "Kill on Sight" order on Smith.

The report by the Corrections Investigation Division into Majors' killing is 10 pages long. In contrast, the investigative report into the May 25 killing of inmate Kendrick Walker at the privately run Wilkinson County Correctional Facility covers 64 pages.

Corrections investigators restricted their interviews to Smith and Moore, never talking to the tower officer or floor officer, despite the fact both were witnesses, according to the report.

"I can't imagine not talking to witnesses," said Matt Steffey, professor at the Mississippi College School of Law.

At no point was Smith ever asked how he got into Majors' cell, according to the report.

"That's a question you don't want to know the answer to," Steffey said.

Under state law, anyone who is an accessory before the fact in an assault or murder can be charged with those crimes.

Under federal law, civil rights violations are among charges that could be brought if a correctional officer opened a cell door to enable an inmate's assault or killing, Steffey said.
Officers "popping the locks is itself a dangerous felony," he said. "It's always been about the will to prosecute and not the law."

Mississippi corrections officials told The Clarion-Ledger no officer has ever been prosecuted for opening doors to enable inmates to assault or kill other inmates.

Steffey said he's seen cases go to trial with less evidence than what The Clarion-Ledger has uncovered.

Smith told the FBI the officers didn't know he was going to kill Majors.

The standard that accessories are held to under the law involves a "foreseeable result," Steffey said.

For instance, if an officer knows an inmate is going to be beaten and that inmate is beaten to death, that result is still foreseeable, he said.

In the killing of Majors, the tower officer apparently "stood by, didn't summon help and had an active role in allowing the assault," he said.

The first indication on the video that medical help was sought took place when the floor officer signaled the tower officer to call for medical help at 7:56 — more than 17 minutes after Smith received the gloves before entering Majors' cell.

Steffey said the fact Majors was being held in protective custody gave officers ample warning that inmates wished him harm, especially Smith, a known violent member of the Simon City Royals.

For Majors' mother, Brenda Moreno, justice means seeing that all those who played a role in her son's murder are punished. "Instead of firing people," she said, "they need to prosecuting people."

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Supplemental material
Hard Look at Hard Time
Epps probe: 'Mississippi Hustle' started with sex scandal

By Emily Le Coz
The Clarion-Ledger

Chris Epps unwittingly triggered the five-year federal investigation that this month ended his career as Mississippi's longest-serving corrections commissioner when he allegedly tried to cover up a warden-inmate sex scandal threatening to tarnish his newest pet project.

It was the last straw for Leake County Sheriff Greg Waggoner, who blew the whistle on Epps immediately after the 2009 incident and thus opened the federal investigation dubbed "Mississippi Hustle."

The investigation, which is ongoing, resulted in a 49-count indictment against Epps and Rankin County businessman Cecil McCrory for their alleged roles in a massive kickback scheme in which Epps took roughly $1 million in exchange for nearly $1 billion in contracts to McCrory-related businesses.

Both men pleaded not guilty to the charges on Nov. 5 at the federal courthouse in Jackson, where Waggoner stood alongside the team of state and federal investigators credited with the crackdown.

Waggoner had declined to comment beyond a few brief statements at the courthouse, but on Thursday he opened up to The Clarion-Ledger about his first whiff of possible impropriety by Epps.

Sitting in his large, wood-paneled office built with inmate labor, Waggoner said it all started when McCrory came to town. The former state legislator and longtime businessman had struck a deal with the Mississippi Department of Corrections to open up a transition center for inmates.
Called Walnut Grove Transition Center, it would boast two separate facilities to house men and women near the end of their prison sentences and help them reintegrate into society.

The center opened in mid-2009 amid much fanfare by Epps, who promoted it as a creative way to cheaply house inmates while reintroducing them back into society. Behind the scenes, though, it allegedly played a key role in the kickback scheme.

Through Epps, MDOC not only leased from McCrory the properties to house the male and female units, but also awarded McCrory the sole-source contracts to operate them, state documents show.

"It looked like everything new that happened with MDOC, Cecil was involved in," Waggoner said.

Meanwhile, McCrory paid off the mortgage on Epps' nearly half-million-dollar home in a gated Flowood subdivision, prompting Epps to tell McCrory he "could get anything he wanted in the future from MDOC," the federal indictment says.

The center housed about 150 men and 100 women in dormitory-like settings. Although still classified as inmates, residents worked outside the facility at pre-approved job sites but otherwise stayed confined.

Residents had to pay McCrory's company, American Transition Services, about $20 per day for room and board. That was in addition to the $6 daily per-inmate fee the company earned from MDOC.

Concerned citizens started calling the Sheriff’s Department immediately after the center opened, Waggoner said. Most complained that inmates roamed the community unsupervised and that some spent entire weekends away from the units.

"They were not supposed to be out at all," Waggoner said. "If I ran my facility like that, Epps would have shut me down, but it seemed like there was no problem when McCrory did it."
Then came the complaint that Walnut Grove Transition Center Warden Grady Sims took a female inmate to a motel in Carthage and had sex with her.

Sims, who was the longtime mayor of the town of Walnut Grove, also served as head of the transition center despite having had no background in corrections. The sexual encounter happened on Nov. 26, 2009 — about one month after he started his job as warden — according to a federal indictment against Sims.

Waggoner immediately reported the allegation to MDOC, which he said assigned an internal investigator to assist his department in investigating the incident. Together, investigators from both agencies talked to the female inmate and gathered ample evidence to take to the district attorney, Waggoner said.

But before they could proceed, the MDOC investigator entered Waggoner's office one day in the spring of 2010 and told him it was over.

"'We're closing the case down,'" Waggoner recalled him saying. "I was shocked. I said, 'What do you mean?' You could tell he wasn't happy about it but that he was given orders."

Waggoner said he believes Epps pulled the plug to avoid bad publicity about the transition center, which he had touted publicly in news releases and newsletters for nearly one year.

Epps' attorney, John Colette, disagreed.

"It's my understanding that MDOC completed the investigation," Colette said. "The investigation found wrongdoing, and they requested of the contractor that the person be terminated. The investigation should be on file."

The Clarion-Ledger was not immediately able to verify the existence of the completed investigation.
Waggoner said requesting the termination of a man who committed a felony doesn't end an investigation. The investigation ends, he said, when the man is indicted and brought to justice.

"If you have knowledge of a felony and chose not to pursue it," he said, "you're negligent in your duty."

Dumbfounded about what he believed was MDOC's abrupt ending of the Sims probe, Waggoner called U.S. Attorney John Dowdy for advice. Dowdy confirmed the call to The Clarion-Ledger and also said he contacted the FBI afterward to report the situation.

FBI agents then set up the first of what would become many conversations with Waggoner and launched an investigation against Sims and eventually Epps. They dubbed that investigation "Mississippi Hustle."

A federal grand jury indicted Sims in October 2011, on one count of sexually assaulting an inmate and one count of telling the inmate to lie to investigators about the encounter. Sims pleaded guilty to the second count in February 2012 and was sentenced to seven months in prison.

By that time, investigators already had dug deep into the alleged kickback scheme between Epps and McCrory but kept mum about their findings until unsealing the federal indictment against the pair earlier this month.

If convicted, each faces more than 200 years behind bars.

Waggoner, though, said more than once during the interview that the investigation hasn't ended. A four-term sheriff with gray hair and a quiet, serious disposition, Waggoner would not elaborate on that subject. Instead, he leaned over his tidy desk and cracked a slight, sly smile.

"I don't think it's over," he finally said. "I don't think the corruption stopped there."

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